

# The spectral material culture in ordinary life: Re-imagining obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

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## Abstract

In 2020 obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) was ranked by the World Health Organisation as one of the top-10 most disabling diseases. Today, it is the fourth most common mental disorder in the United Kingdom. This research is based upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted since 2016 in Merseyside and Cheshire, UK, which re-imagines obsessive thoughts and compulsive rituals among women who self-diagnosed as having ‘magical thinking OCD’. Referring to variations in the brain, OCD is often described as a type of neurodiversity. While, in popular culture, representations of OCD practices invariably invoke anthropological ideas of magical correspondence and animism as objects are assumed to possess an overpowering agency over the person who is supposed to master their possessions. This study aims to firmly place the notion of OCD in the realm of a spectral material culture and initiate a wider sociological conversation about the ‘haunting’ of a wide range of subject-objects. In doing so, I want to remove magic from the normative shadow of concepts such as the mysterious and the ghostly and instead employ the ordinary everyday as a sociological analytic for understanding the magic of mass-produced things and global processes of automation.

## Keywords

animism, disorder, everyday, obsessive-compulsive, spectral material culture

## Introduction: Spectral material culture

Derrida (1993) notes that each age has popular ghosts and a hauntology at play. In this article, I want to firmly place the realm of a spectral material culture in the ordinary everyday, based on an ethnographic study of women in their mid-life, who live in

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Merseyside and Cheshire, UK.<sup>1</sup> Each self-diagnose with what is defined by, for example, leading private mental health providers, such as the Washington Centre for Cognitive Therapy in the United States, and the national charities SANE in Australia, or OCD-UK, as ‘magical thinking obsessive compulsive disorder’. This is the notion that intrusive thoughts can influence the happening of unfortunate events and their outcomes and of ‘magical thinking running amok’ (Beyond OCD.org, n.d.). OCD-UK refers to this as a clinical condition:

Magical Thinking Intrusive Thoughts – is the fear . . . that even thinking about something bad will make it more likely to happen – sometimes also called ‘thought-action fusion’. Sufferers are beset by intrusive bad thoughts. They try to dispel them by performing rituals – magic rituals, in effect – that are often bizarre . . . and involve linking actions or events that could not possibly be related to each other. (OCD-UK, n.d.)

In this article, I argue that making the ‘strange’ ordinary is essential to investigating compulsive repeating ritual and the touching and checking of objects that helps to control obsessive thought about disastrous happenings. Indeed, I suggest, the most valuable framework for an analysis of ‘magical thinking OCD’ is the analytic of the drama of the everyday. Analysing the interaction between the mundane and extraordinary may act, as Victoria Robinson (2015) notes, ‘as an interpretive device that can generate new, empirically grounded theoretical insights about connectedness in sociology’ (p. 903). This is to better grasp the cultural specificity of the (un)familiar in situ and how mass-produced objects and global socioeconomic interactions (Mallett, 2004) are reshaped by reiterating human creativity, but also recognising the pressure of customs and norms.

Consider the following account of routine and familiarity in the home, traditionally seen as a place of safety and comfort (Lupton, 2013; Miller, 2008). Noreen, aged 54, ritualistically plays with objects (e.g. drink cartons, toilet rolls and cushions) because they ‘understand the real me, the me I keep hidden, even from hubby’. Noreen feels that these ‘pointless’ things are separate entities from sentimental objects or objects with character (Balthazar, 2016), such as lucky ornaments or personal items that her children gave her for her birthday or Christmas. These precious items instead remind her of memories, like an anniversary or a time in her child’s life (e.g. when her firstborn created a clay pot at school). Since she had already empowered these objects with an emotional function (see also Christou & Janta, 2019), they could not be confused with her ‘OCD objects’, as she calls them. Her ‘OCD ways’, as she has always referred to these, are centred around throwaway objects that carry no unique value: repetitively moving tables, polishing lamps, touching curtains, squeezing toothpaste and walking through doors. Thus, rather than appealing to the mysterious (e.g. lucky objects, charms and talismans), she is resorting to using the standard things all around her.

Noreen explained how these ordinary things exist in the background, challenging established certainties and routines, and go unnoticed until they open up ‘unknown consequences’ to her, causing her to become consumed with worry. Her obsessive thoughts relate to a wellspring of potential anxiety, an ‘automatically’ inescapable misfortune that is present/absent and assumes immediacy if her compulsive routines are not maintained (Margulies, 1996, p. 90). For example, Noreen would repeatedly perseverate on thoughts

of illness. She would compulsively utilise household objects to prevent, for example, cancer from happening. She may, for instance, repetitively switch a bedroom lamp on and off, remove plugs from the wall a designated number of times or touch the oven knob in a series of patterns. In the latter case, she painfully emphasised that this was not necessarily because she was worried about a fire, but once she was outside of the house, she would worry about cancer and needed to return and verify that it was off to prevent a tumour from growing that very day. She obsesses over these items due to their unseen nature, as she thinks they may cause ‘loss’ if she is not vigilant. She still played down however her ‘little OCD’, even as she insisted that there were ‘really important dangers’ or ‘whodunits’ that she consistently returns to, like the fear of a cancer diagnosis, especially within her immediate family.

## The strangely familiar

Sarah Pink (2012) argues that to understand everyday life we need to acknowledge that ‘it is neither static nor necessarily mundane’, but, as Noreen’s account articulates, part of ‘a dynamic and changing material environment, shifting ways of perceiving, knowing and being’ (p. 14). Pink’s work recognises the importance of the everyday and its long debated and complex sociological history, being what Lefebvre (1947/1991) terms the ‘common ground’ or ‘connective tissue’ of all human thoughts and activities. Erving Goffman’s seminal *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959/2010) examines the various frames individuals ‘use to locate and construct themselves as social subjects’ (Fadil and Fernando, 2015, p. 66) and in *Relations in Public* (2010) Goffman tries to locate the passive norms and modes by which pedestrians do not continually bump into one another. Meanwhile, challenging the taken-for-granted nature of ‘normal’ life, Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (2011) calls for a de-familiarisation of daily routine, and the obscure operational logic of doing things. He offers a microanalysis of the creative tactics of the common person in disrupting the all-pervasive forces of power, customary rules and norms, amid a modern life haunted by an absence-presence of people and things (see Fadil & Fernando, 2015).

Analysing the practices of OCD, as these articulate uncertainty, spatial universes are transformed, especially in the domestic sphere. As we can see in Noreen’s account, her daily world becomes an ambivalent space where what you see is never quite what you get (Segrott & Doel, 2007). How best to capture this? Anthropologists have long theorised about the relationship between mystical and mundane powers within the intimacy of the home and the occurrence of occult forces, such as with my own study of West African witchcraft’s ‘philosophy of misfortune’ among Ghanaians in the West Bronx, New York City (Parish, 2018). Capturing the danger of intimate relationships, witches are envious women within the matrilineage who cause ‘inexplicable’ misfortune to those they are jealous of, particularly wealthy kin. However, under this approach, magic sometimes becomes an imaginary or symbolic distortion, its ‘unreal’ machinations representing the reified image of what is understood as ‘real’ society. What we need instead is an ‘approach that transcends these oppositions entirely’ and begins with an in-depth understanding of our interlocutors’ micro ‘OCD’ encounters and how ‘magic, in other words, is not transcendent and immaterial but fully immanent, malleable and transferable’ (Espirito Santo, in press, para. 5).

The concept of the ‘uncanny’ does go some way towards incorporating the disturbing and fearful back into the realm of the usual. Freud’s (1919/2005) concept of the uncanny recognises the dialectic between the familiar and unfamiliar, being translated by Royle (2003) as ‘unhomely’. Of course, as David Morgan recognises, the concept of ‘homeliness’ has the power to transform. He shows how sociologists are well versed in making the familiar strange (Morgan, 2011). And that the ‘feeling’ of home which was once straightforward may later become a source of disturbance (Chapman & Hockey, 1999). Importantly, for my purposes of analysing the strangely familiar, Freud’s concept of the uncanny also captures the mechanical and banal processes that can reveal something of the enigma of the everyday (Bubandt, 2018, p. 5). Bubandt, for example, recalls how the Japanese robotics engineer Masahiro Mori suggested that robots become ‘uncanny’ when they increasingly approach but still fail to achieve full human likeness, a concept captured by the ‘uncanny valley’ (p. 2).

In this article though I want to remove the sociological out of the normative shadow of ‘ghostly’ and ‘haunting’ phenomena (see Gordon, 1997), to foreground the ‘ordinary’ encounter of what a spectral material culture looks like. Whereas modern mental health charities ‘would consider the treatment of objects as personified subjects an illusion or fallacy (likely to be dismissed as superstition)’ (see Hornborg, 2015, p.48), there is an increasing emphasis in the sociological literature on the processual and relational complexity of everyday life and how relations of sociality are embodied in technologies and objects when looking at mental illnesses such as OCD. Schillmeier (2017), for example, looking at everyday experiences of illness, argues that normalised practices of care are in fact profound. Specifically, insists Joanna Latimer, we need to understand what kinds of worlds are being made (and unmade) in health settings. Social care, she suggests, requires attention to the part that mundane materials play in ‘world-making’ (2018, p. 379). For example, Buse et al. (2018), recognising the significance of the mundane, investigate spatialities of care, temporalities of care and practices of care across a range of clinical and non-clinical spaces, including hospitals, hospices and care homes. Meanwhile, through an ethnographic consideration of the convergences of biotechnologies and the in/exclusive routines of medical practice, Latimer et al. (2004) contend that the routine life of the clinic works as a sensory materiality. While even the most natural act of breathing engages with the materiality of hygiene control for those most susceptible to everyday infection (Will, 2020).

Sociologists have shown how far from being inert, everyday things are dynamic animators of the ‘doing’ of everyday life as well as generative of emotion and intentionality. Wise (2005), in her work on ‘living multiculture’ in Australia, explains how it is apparently micro social life – the small, banal, and the familiar – which often becomes a tipping point for other things. Often dismissed as trivial, everyday material practices frequently slide away unseen as Rachel Hurdley (2006) examines in her work on mantle-pieces. The seemingly minor quotidian practices of arranging photographs, knickknacks, everyday objects – some loved, some hated – in what Hurdley terms ‘unheard settings’, reveal new dynamics (Hurdley, 2006). Parkin (1999, p. 303) describes how ‘attached’ material-object footprints produce unique relations between persons and their possessions. This may also include a temporal trajectory of objects. Hockey et al. (2014) illustrate through an analysis of footwear and shoe-wearing how this operates as more than a

journey through past times, like Proust's madeleines and a theory of emotional memory. Focusing therefore upon a sociological reimagining of seemingly inconsequential materials and processes, I argue, enables a fresh imagining of 'person-like and inanimate thing-like objects' as OCD comes to redefine a personal and profoundly intimate engagement with the products and processes of mass mechanisation.

## Methodology: Situating (in)visibility

How do we methodologically engage with exceptional realities obscured not elsewhere but in the commonplace realm? The theoretical route taken here was developed in response to the different avenues of ethnographic research undertaken over a period of more than 10 years. Data collection began at a bingo hall in Liverpool in the 1990s. Fieldwork originally was on concepts such as luck, chance and fate and I first predominantly engaged with females gambling at a bingo hall in South Liverpool. Extensive, open-ended interviews were conducted that were loosely structured and followed a series of questions which were intended to explore respondents' lived experiences using these ideas. However, building upon my other research on West African witchcraft and ritual, the focus became more about the use of talismans and lucky objects in a range of settings.

Research during this time proved fruitful for building trusted relationships with initially 20 women over a prolonged period, and, later, among their relatives, friends, and other members of their wider social networks, some of whom knew each other or had heard of one another or their partners, or who lived in the same areas of Liverpool. Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out with participants in a range of settings. Informal conversations were conducted, for example, at the interviewees' homes, in a car while driving, via email, and even while joining some participants for coffee and dog walks. These distinct locations proved invaluable as I noticed that although such objects were not classed by them as lucky, while driving to their destinations, the gear stick would be touched three times. Or there was a repetitive checking of a purse while leisurely walking in a park and constant touching of a coffee cup in a cafe. Over a period, I also observed that some women possessed seemingly banal objects which seemed important for them to touch or check, such as car doors, or they would suddenly return home to check an appliance was turned off. Although OCD was not an initial focus, increasingly several women over time referred to themselves as a 'little OCD' and it gradually became part of common parlance. Once, in somebody's house, I observed that food packaging was lined up in their cupboards in perfect colour coordinated rows. When I mentioned how tidy things were or how ordered – for example, towels hung in the bathroom – interlocutors would say, 'it is my OCD'. Or, about a friend, laugh, 'she is so OCD'. This referenced a growing trend where the spread of diagnoses and psychiatric labels such as ADHD makes sense of (and indeed shapes) feelings and embodied practices. Indeed, the popular imagination has generated an unexplained fixation with OCD in terms of its self-diagnosis and the reasoning behind it. Unlike other mental disorders, which are rarely addressed publicly, OCD has entered popular culture and colloquial conversation. Favourite television programmes increasingly we watched together would centre around UK reality shows like *Obsessive Compulsive Cleaners*. Participants would refer to their

own OCD practices and point me in the direction of friends who they thought ‘more OCD’ than themselves.

This led me to concentrate further ethnographic research since 2016 with four women and, later, in 2018, three more. The accounts of four of these women form the basis for this study. None of the women knew each other but have mutual friends. Never having been medically diagnosed, each though self-diagnosed as having obsessive worries and engaging in compulsively touching, checking, or avoiding objects to stop ruminating over the same anxieties repeatedly. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association and cited by the national organisation OCD-UK, in its fifth revision, DSM V, published in May 2013, put for the first time Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in its own category. A formal clinical classification stated that OCD is characterised by the presence of obsessions and/or compulsions. Obsessions are defined as recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or images that are experienced as intrusive and unwanted, whereas *compulsions* are repetitive behaviours or mental acts that an individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession or according to rules that must be applied rigidly (DSM V).

Self-diagnosis of OCD is common throughout the United Kingdom, United States and Japan, for example, with online tests and self-report criteria freely available. Today, many people in the general population experience subclinical symptoms of OCD. Over a two-year period, four women often checked various online search engines to look up their symptoms. One woman, Joanne, said she sometime ‘fixated on car crashes, especially those involving loved-ones like my mum’. Another, Katie, said to me in the same year, ‘my doctor would lock me up if he knew what I do’. Noreen inferred that even her husband did not realise the extent of her rituals around touching items. While Jo, having once been on anti-depressants, said her GP casually remarked that she was on the ‘lighter’ spectrum, but that she had not bothered to follow up this diagnosis in a prescribed way. All four women, often frustratingly, expressed to me how their OCD was misunderstood among their friends and was not about ‘wanting things perfect’. All thought that OCD did not overwhelm their lives and that there were lengthy periods where their OCD was quite mild or absent. At other times, as Noreen expressed to me:

I’m just not comfortable even discussing this topic today. I’m living in a thriller. All my favourites . . . you know, pet rituals, are turned in on themselves . . . I just am compulsive . . . once it’s in my head . . . my little rituals start . . . and that’s it . . . game on . . . a wasted day . . . dining room table . . . a vase I hate . . . but I can’t move it, ever . . . I am fearing it’s the lynchpin . . . and everything. What a stupid woman I am.

Each woman knew that I had previously conducted research on witchcraft and magic in West Africa and, since 2005, among Ghanaians in the West Bronx, New York City, and that I had researched the use of ritual to ward off misfortune. They thought that my fieldwork might be relevant to their understanding of their own rituals and ‘OCD practices’. While they were often keen to talk about their OCD rituals, they were also eager to stress that this was ‘not voodoo like you know in Africa’ nor about ‘lucky charms’ or ‘spooks – don’t believe really in that séance sort of ghostbuster thing’ as Jo once said. But, rather, about ‘normal things, probably you are not interested in’ and ‘silly bits and pieces’.



Following these comments by Jo and other women, my empirical research on OCD emphasises how to engage with the unseen as well as the need for observable performances of stable practices (e.g. habits, homeliness and routine) that often consist of highly imprecise terms (Southerton, 2013). Das (2018) argues that everyday life is so ordinary that it hides itself, but at the same time, it cannot reveal anything else. Attempting to deal with this conundrum, I focused on what Sneath et al. (2009) term ‘ritualistic technologies’ – to empathetically imagine an outcome to hypothetical events played out in social life. In other words, what are the ideological, social and technological practices that allow us to make legible the everyday effects of OCD rituals? So, methodologically, I followed the technological imagination and the idea that objects are useful when it comes to imagining misfortune in daily life.

### **OCD, animism and alienated automation**

The outdated concept of fetishism is hopelessly tied to the dichotomy between persons and inanimate objects and the attribution of spirit to inert things (Newell, 2014). Magical thinking OCD is frequently referred to in the psychiatric literature as irrational and intrusive thought (Fennell, 2007; Foster & Kokko, 2009; Lochner & Stein, 2003). A disparaging view, this asserts that magic is an exotic, curious phenomenon, but at the same time magic is dismissed as a relatively harmless set of beliefs (Wiener, 2013, p. 496). In a less charitable interpretation, magical thought is understood as the pathology of a troubled mind, moving far beyond the real (Campbell, 1996). Indeed, Kilroy-Marac (2016) writes how material disorder – especially that of the domestic variety – has come, she states, to stand ‘alternately as evidence, symptom and potential cause of mental disorder in the North American popular and psychiatric imagination’ (Kilroy-Marac, 2016, p.439).

Like other national OCD charities, the British organisation OCD-UK identifies how there is a universal OCD symptom structure involving cleaning, symmetry, hoarding, taboo thoughts, or fear of harm. OCD practices are held to grant objects an overpowering agency over the person, witnessing an overidentification of subjects with objects. Citing the canons of classical anthropology on magic, James Frazer and Lévy-Bruhl, various charities explore OCD on their online web pages, drawing implicitly on the notion of sympathetic magic and Frazer’s two main laws of similarity and contagion – how any effect resembles its cause (or like produces like) and that whatever is done to a material object will affect the individual who was once in contact with it (Frazer, 1895/1990; Lévy-Bruhl, 1966). In other words, when objects make a physical connection, the essence is considered permanently transferred. Examining ‘magical thinking OCD’, OCD-UK talk online about a ‘magical correspondence’ which directly affects or creates physical objects through the effort of thought, will, wishes, or words (i.e. mind-over-matter magic), which affects people’s lives and health through prayer, magic spells, rituals, or by promising reinforcement in the afterlife (i.e. communicative magic).

The concept of the fetish alluded to above by OCD organisations seems to defy categorisation – ‘it is material yet spiritual, an object of exchange value and yet invaluable one moment and valueless the next, it is magic and yet also religion’ (see Newell, 2014, p. 189). Following Marx’s insight that commodities perceived to have intrinsic or magical agency (i.e. fetishes) are pivotal components of political economy, here also lies a

conundrum not only of the subjectification of objects, but the objectification of subjects, inducing a certain fear (Hornborg, 2015). 'This slippery animism is at once the origin of the uncanny fascination with the fetish' (Newell, 2014, p. 189). Indeed, Achille Mbembe's (2020) claim is that late capitalism is defined, in part, by its reinvention of animism as artifice and by our overidentification with and desire for cultural objects – cell phones, social media and the like. He refers to a sense in which technology now captures the energy of the living, compatible with super computers, nanorobots and artificial intelligence which have become the profane embodiment of beliefs, faith and the divine. Noreen illustrates how commodity fetishism, reiterating Marx, is also increasingly a religion of the everyday. She draws upon the same unremarkable objects in her OCD routines, allowing machine produced tins of soup and packets of crisps, and not traditional uncanny objects such as dolls and puppets, such a powerful mediative agency that these shout instructions at her in the aisles of the supermarket:

The more I'm surrounded by more items, the worse it is going to get . . . Car showrooms, supermarket shelves . . . which tin to touch . . . petrol pumps . . . doors to open . . . nightmare . . . even making . . . coffee . . . which mug to use . . . upsetting my home and routines . . . stuff that knows me. It gets [to be] too much because it all seems connected . . . my bed, the sheets, illness, my husband's job, the cat litter tray. Scary stuff . . . does not bother me at all – dolls, puppets . . . no, it's where there [are] lots and lots of objects like the Asda . . . all like screaming at me . . . makes . . . it hard to get down an aisle in the shop . . . without touching . . . or going back because I've walked the wrong way . . . put one thing in . . . basket in the wrong way . . . [it] made me fall ill quite frankly.

Yet, she also describes how objects 'are quite like me . . . they know like how I really feel' and that there are even certain materials and properties that 'intuitively knew her personal worst thought'. Noreen also alludes to a concealed safe space when she fills up her car with petrol as objects function as vital mediations of herself:

I drove to fill petrol Monday at the Asda. What a disaster. I thought I'll go to this pump . . . changed my mind . . . I imagined . . . my boy dying . . . losing my job . . . changed my mind again . . . nearly hit the man parking in front of me . . . thought if the amount goes above £20, everything will be OK . . . went two pennies over . . . but this was a sign offering me help with my children . . . So, the petrol station was really my god, an invisible shrine. . . I'm ashamed to admit . . . the bit where . . . the pump measures exact [*sic*] the petrol in litres made me think I know where I am . . . like angels . . . like magic really.

While Noreen refers to an agency of 'angels' and petrol pumped full of magic, the cultural theorist Steven Shaviro (2005), looking at human-object relations, has dubbed these 'capitalist animism': the conception of the commodity being intrinsically endowed with a magical soul. Alf Hornborg (2015) analyses how the fetishised artefacts of money and machines may not necessarily 'be "ensouled" *persons* in modernity, but they are certainly believed to have autonomous agency' (p. 49). Their technology, he argues, appears something akin to a global magic. Indeed, technology, Hornborg says, is 'our own version of magic in a process of reification' (2015, p. 51). Magic, in other words, emphasises the mysterious and powerful workings of the marketplace of capitalism as



esoteric registers are shifted to material registers and back again as spiritual presences pour into objects.

If a macro rereading of animism draws attention to a creative re-enchantment with the world, Pels (2010) characterises an alternative logic as fetishist where the fetish is an object that, by virtue of its sheer material make-up, affects a course of affairs. For example, Joanne at times privileges an object (e.g. a bottle of washing up liquid or a concrete wall) by performing its intention according to its regulatory consistency. In this process she redistributes personhood to other-than-human beings and particles and chemicals

I know where I am with it . . . it's making up [*sic*] of certain ingredients . . . by using it three times a day . . . it gets rid of anxiety . . . puts things to rest . . . the fourth time using it . . . forget it . . . I disappear down a rabbit hole . . . I repeat the sequence again. I couldn't not use Fairy . . . we know each other too well! I love even reading the back of the bottle . . . all its chemicals and whatnot . . .

A bottle of detergent also contains a computer code that needs to be calculated, as Joanne puts it. So, while washing up liquid works best on greasy plates by using hot water, Joanne says that it will also only work to prevent misfortune 'in her OCD mind' if properly utilised (i.e. touching it three times). Its material qualities and meaning can be reprogrammed through circulation, or what Joanne calls her 'miniature world of neatness' which consists of 'little knots and problems'. Thus, a product's make-up of materials also entails repetitious elements that have the capacity to stave off the unpredictable and can clean up uncertainty by restoring a culture of harmony and calm. Yet, she considered herself an 'idiot' that was caught within this OCD world, 'like a bloody maze', when she investigated an object's resemblance to a human and the feelings it induces.

Margulies (1996), analysing the work on the everyday by the French film-maker Chantal Ackerman in *Nothing Happens*, draws attention to the 'automatic, stable processes which are at work concealed beneath the flux of animism' (p. 90) as familiar objects bump up against each other, compelling a repetitive patterning of orderliness and routine. Moreover, repetitive and ritualised checking and touching of objects, she argues, is revealing not of a Freudian uncanny compulsion or irrationality but of regular material processes. Jo, an office worker, highlights another technique to understanding her OCD which is through this same dynamic of mechanical immobility, or what Newell (2014) calls 'bad objecthood'. Jo embedded her routines in pens on her desk and the same empty packages occupying her office chair. Her thinking reflected a procedural science:

. . . even [*sic*] things out . . . lining things up. Beautiful. The photocopier . . . I'm like the movements . . . [a] process, a way of doing things . . . Put a box down, pick it up. Put another box inside it. Take it out. Always know what is going to happen next.

The mundane object can quicken the unknown by producing a surprising intimate logic. This is to concentrate on the repetitive rhythms of habitual existence, and what Cherrington (2016), in relation to sporting rituals, terms 'a microsociology of misfortune'. Jo saw each of her ritualised OCD moves as being determined by a rational process of standardisation and conformity which hemmed in and boxed off obsessive

thought. She liked the straight edges of boxes, including their right angles and identical evenness. Moving them would disturb the order created, but she also felt hemmed in by them and wanted to throw away the cardboard. She worried about the effects of this and whether it would set off an unfamiliar chain of events, causing her life to potentially unravel. Her partner thought this was silly. However, Jo remained staring at the boxes and the highly visible packaging codes on their sides to remind herself that her life could change for the worse.

While Noreen understands the objects that she compulsively checks as, in her phrase, 'knowing' her, these items are also considered to be comfortably possessed by the metaphoric repetitive relations of the 'product', including the staccato rhythms of mass production, mechanical steps, and the gear turning that automation requires. Machines use analogue programming in the form of flywheels, linkages and cams to replace human labour and the cognition required to perform specific, regular, predictable tasks. Joanne, a self-diagnosed perfectionist, fixates upon such processes. She says that her OCD objects are programmed by 'cogs' that control danger, especially house electrical fires, which may occur 'out of the blue'. Noreen also emphasises the intrinsic mechanics and materials of objects and how they are made:

A bread factory behind mum's . . . watching loaves of bread going around and around a conveyor belt . . . day and night . . . small loaves, baps. I looked it up . . . I'd love to work there . . . it's so straight up and narrow . . . I like to read up about chemicals, what is it? Their compounds – what oil is made up of nylon . . . Dupont is thought . . . to causing [*sic*] cancer . . . even chemicals can cause cancer and have a nasty side . . . All goes around and around . . . but for me, going past . . . is shitty mess . . . cancer-causing substances . . . shocking stuff . . . unless I can live life like the bread factory.

Noreen almost creates a 'third person', a vast sociotechnical fabric out of bread as she allows fragments of bread-making to allude to a magic of the unseen that is not transcendent but moulded by her. Similarly, these practices hide a logic that is compulsively moulded by actors into repetitive OCD patterns and sequences: the neck of a vase, the varnished wood of a desk, the screw top of a bottle of household bleach. The animism of familiar ordinary things is revealing of previously unseen regular rhythms of everyday practices that are both magical and mechanical in equal measure (Bennett & Watson, 2002).

## Material residues

Objects also articulate the social recycling of images, sounds and memories, which incorporates material residue from places and people communicating through time and space. Hetherington (2004) starts from a premise that the process of consumption is never truly completed, not even when an object is thrown away, since things can continue to mark social relations with their absence presence. For Noreen (as well as other interviewees), sometimes her overwhelming feelings of being trapped by things mark a turning point in an OCD cycle after which nothing is ever the same. This pulls her to compulsively re-examine her life through the prism of the same vase or skirt or brand of soap. In another case, during long-term ethnographic fieldwork with a woman, Katie,

recently made redundant from her administrative job at a large holiday firm, she always returned to what she called her OCD and ‘distant memories’ about failing exams or arriving late once for an airplane flight and emphasised maintaining an ideal situation where everything would be ‘kept just so’ and ‘on time’. She felt that the glue holding stuff in place was based on her OCD repetitive rituals, which she created every day in an identical narrative that included where to place and touch objects. Katie repeatedly replayed to me the same potential adversities to account for the tragic consequences that might occur if an OCD ritual was not activated:

My whole life . . . built around . . . fear of probability . . . like a double life that is hidden to everybody else. You . . . all see a nice home, family . . . behind it . . . complete terror . . . that I return to over and over again. It’s like a secret life, really it is, everything revolves around this . . . doesn’t matter how different . . . It always ends the same.

Katie felt that whatever task she completed or recent activity she proposed, her feelings would always return to the same state of uneasiness that she had always experienced. Hence the reason she thought of for her symptoms of OCD in the first place. She explained that she could not ‘get outside of [her] own head’ and the feeling that something terrible was imminent. Certain objects reminded her of this. If she ever enjoyed herself, like a day out shopping that she had recently experienced, she felt even worse, and her sense of dread would become uncontrollable:

I just think . . . well . . . what awful thing is going to happen next. I spent a whole two weeks in the Canaries. By the pool . . . I could not sit still . . . my mind was racing the entire time . . . every nice dinner, day out, good weather . . . I felt cursed . . . I was enjoying myself too much . . . see, and I could feel them . . . staring . . . I was doing all sorts of mad ritual . . . folding my towel, putting . . . a foot on the ground . . . that they could see . . . one girl laughed . . .

To prepare for such feelings, she lived under a rigid order which she called ‘OCD observance’. For example, her work clothes were always laid out the previous evening, trips were planned well in advance, she always sat in the same seat at the cinema, and she was always the first to arrive. She was never late for things, so she left for work and arrived at train stations far too early due to her fear of missing the train. Her appointments for various treatments, like with a dentist, would take an entire day because she would be worried that she would not get a parking space. She would even use her iPad to simply look at the same websites repetitively, trapping her in a world (she cried) of her own making. Her worries became jammed and wedged between objects, and she felt that it was impossible to change things. Where could she begin? The history of objects that she fixated upon referred to fearing a moment that had never happened, or what she called ‘dead moments’. During these ‘dead moments’ her mind, she said, would go into overdrive. Her compulsions entailed, among other things, a memory stick that she could not use after a particular time at night and pulling her curtains open and shut 12 times. Her objects consisted of ‘monster’ qualities that allowed her to become more than herself, but also a ‘hollow version of me, stuck in time’, she said, as she revisited the same anxieties, leaving her in a ‘dark world’:

Over and over, I go . . . I'm never in new situations . . . and see everything that is happening today through . . . past experiences . . . cloud my judgement . . . like, I think, a filter. Even new places . . . It is . . . like the saying 'wherever you go, you take yourself' . . . this makes for a tiny world for me and . . . I don't experience, I don't think, like you other people. The feelings, my OCD thought, shut down . . . my thinking . . . everything . . . I miss a lot.

As Kilroy-Marac (2016) discusses, Katie looked *through* objects to see what they disclosed about her history, and what they disclosed about herself. In this process, she also glimpsed the unknown, which frightened her further. When new objects were brought to bear, they became built into a functioning system of ritualised order/disorder such as a trip to IKEA postponed until the third attempt, because she needed to compulsively touch her purse kept in her bag on the passenger seat, a dog's bowl being placed in a specific cupboard at a designated time, a walk up the stairs twice between 6:00 p.m. and 6:12 p.m. each evening and opening and shutting her front door at a correct angle, a task which once took 45 minutes to complete. These became fixed points regarding how Katie viewed her day, but never offered Katie permanent peace of mind.

## Conclusion

To analyse spectral material culture is not to look to the mysterious, but to how we encounter what the International OCD Foundation (IOCDF, n.d.) calls 'keeping family routine normal' as OCD is experienced, especially among industrialised cultures around the world. Yet, I have argued for the dissolution of the naturally given aspects of daily life. Scrutinising mental health conditions and how the everyday is experienced, many sociologists point to the elicitation of processes of extension between 'impartial' materials and persons which become apparent, as Latimer et al. (2004) show through complicated object/subject relationships. This also applies to the unseen practices of the home. Errázuriz et al. (2020), for example, reflect on the specific ways in which 'mundane' objects are arranged in Chilean homes to become dynamic animators of intention. Building upon how the 'nature' of things is kept and valued, I have suggested, allows for a novel sociological imagination which attempts to normalise and pinpoint 'magical thinking OCD', and what I term the everyday strange, and making this familiar. To examine obsessive practices is to enquire into a relationality, where even the handling and touching the knobs of a cooker or opening the door of a car is fraught with anxiety. Indeed, Chaney (2002) identifies how the everyday acts as a space for 'other ways of being' that can be envisaged which goes beyond routine, custom and norms, carefully attending to what we might call the lived detail of 'nothing happening', and the potential of making 'nothing' into a 'something'.

To examine 'magical thinking OCD' practices in this way is to remove anxiety and misfortune from a conversation about 'haunting' phenomena (Gordon, 1997). It is not to present magic as a (super)natural epiphany, but, instead, to recognise, as do studies of West African witchcraft, that familiar relationships may also be a source of unseen danger (Parish, 2018). Consequently, rather than a focus upon an otherworldliness of ordinary 'stuff', the examination of a spectral material culture entails analysing the 'micro-sociological' aspects of interactional situations and repertoires to engender

minute connections between ritual spheres, creating spaces for the generative self and new forms of knowing/unknowing about misfortune (Neal & Murgi, 2015). It is to do justice to the more profoundly interstitial places and minute resistances where magic works as Bonhomme (2012) articulates when looking at the anonymity of habitus in urban Cameroon. It is to highlight what an interlocuter called 'know-how' – the dynamic interplay of the magical within and not by spectral forces who live outside of the everyday (Blanco del Pilar, 2010).

This is not to conflate OCD with individualised belief. De Certeau (2011) has shown how routine strategies are co-constitutive of wider presences. This is also to examine the enactment of a materiality and the magic of political economies (Hornborg, 2015). One of the most interesting things about the movement mediated by OCD actions is an unfolding animism, a glimpse of an evolving material, rather than 'uncanny' model, as subjects-objects create their realities and deposit the contingency and unpredictability of their ritualised practices across private and public landscapes. Objects can be turned into subjects, and vice versa. Rather than discussing the conditions of subjects and objects as nouns (see Morgan, 2011), it is apt, argues Hornborg (2015), to consider them in the global capitalist marketplace as *verbs* – as processes of 'subjectivation' and 'objectivation' that must be continuously attended to in Western knowledge production where industrial technology, he suggests, acts as a kind of Euro-American magic (p.48).

We may therefore trace the global mass objects of OCD, rather than just its discourse, for their local movements and affects. Bennett and Silva (2004) identify that while the everyday is often conceived as a site of repetition and 'mechanical action', it is also a space where innovative meanings may be glimpsed and reproduced. Indeed, machine fetishism refracts and expands all kinds of 'technological imaginaries'. From the perspective of interlocutors, alienable mass-automation helps to build an intimate conversation about animism secretly structuring sociality. Through an analysis of the touching and ordering of the materials of everyday life we can observe how the regular repositioning of objects (Curtis, 2010) makes possible an OCD horizon where objects, subjects and events are stitched together, checked and strewn, as Das shows in India, via the descent of violence into the recesses of the ordinary (Das, 2007, p. 13). Rather than referring to 'matter out of place', OCD practices detailed here entail a shift away from the current arrangement of things to embrace contradiction, uncertainty, opening new potentialities but also a great solidarity with the repetitive orderings of globally circulating things. For the exceptional, debates Highmore (2005), is 'there to be found at the heart of the everyday' (p. 2) and understanding the magical involves scrutinising the sociological daily encounter, for that is exactly its site.

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